

Gifts of the global church

Margaret De Jong

When I was twenty-three, I prayerfully considered an opportunity to serve in Haiti. I was interested in spending some time overseas using my nurs-

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ing skills, but when asked to commit to a three-year assignment, that span of time sounded very long. Yet as I prayed about this opportunity, I clearly heard the Lord say, “You can stay or you can go. The choice is yours. But you will learn things there that you would never learn here.”

After receiving those words, I was ready to pack my bags and head off on a three-year learning adventure. Little did I know that I would spend eleven years in Haiti, and eleven more in Senegal. And little did I know how much of my learning would happen through the church in these places. I am so grateful for how the global church in these two

countries has contributed to my walk of faith and helped shape me into the person I am today. Not everyone has the opportunity for such rich experiences, and it is always with joy that I attempt to pass on to others some of what my sisters and brothers in Christ elsewhere have given to me.

If you are hoping for something you have never heard before, I warn you that what I share here is not profound. And yet it is indeed profound, in that the gifts I received abroad are vital for the body of Christ anywhere, anytime. While much of the church in the United States and Canada has been struggling to reclaim a missional identity, the global church of which I have been a part has only ever seen itself as missional, and it excels in gifts essential for proclaiming the kingdom of God. Three gifts in particular stand out to me from my many years of participating in Haitian and Senegalese churches: faith, vision, and hospitality, and it is on those gifts that I focus my observations here.

Faith in God's provision and God's transforming power

I could give countless examples of how I have grown while being gifted to walk with Christians in Haiti and Senegal and to see them live out their faith. Here I will relate only one story. In my seventh year in Haiti, I moved to a new area and became active in a congregation there. When I heard they were going to have a summer missions trip to another area of the country, to proclaim the good news of Jesus and pray for the sick, I signed up, too, to see how the Haitian church did missions. But even after spending several years in this country, I still was full of pride and thought I wouldn't have much to learn.

Was I ever wrong. As we traveled together in a crammed bus for several hours over exceedingly bumpy roads, I began to hear the stories of how others were able to be part of this trip. One woman had no means to pay her way. Even the day before, with no funding in hand, she was convinced that God wanted her on this trip and God would provide. She woke up the morning of the trip, opened her front door, and found the cash she needed on her doorstep! Another woman earned her income by selling her wares on a table at the local market. She knew she was giving up a week's worth of income to be a part of this mission, but she had heard from the Lord that she should come, and there she was.

I was so humbled and challenged as I saw the faith of these missionaries, who were trusting God to provide from day to day. My income may have been meagre by North American standards, but it was far more than that of these fellow missionaries. I didn't even have to use a week of paid vacation, because from my work context, I was participating in church life and learning more of the culture. But these Haitian missionaries, because of their faith in God's provision, were willing to sacrifice their time and money to join in God's work. And in spite of their very limited means, throughout the week, when they met others who needed food or clothing or medicines, they were quick to put their hands in their pockets or purses and pass on what little they had. I had no doubt that they regularly shared with others a much higher percentage of their income than I was inclined to give. Their faith in God's provision gave them freedom to be incredibly generous to help others in need.¹

¹ I also recognize that Haitian and African cultures operate very differently from Western cultures in sharing of resources. Within one's own network, one gives to another as a kind of savings system, but then the receiver is obligated to give in return when the giver falls into need. But in this case, the local missionaries were giving sacrificially to those they would probably never see again. For further reading about money issues, which

And that was just the beginning of learning from the faith of my Haitian brothers and sisters. When we got up every morning at 4 o'clock to spend two hours in prayer and worship, I was once again humbled

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as I thought of my own prayer life and relationship with Jesus. What a gift to see the passionate faith of this group, many of whom had been liberated from fear and enslavement to the powers of voodoo, a strong element of Haitian culture. They sang and danced, recited psalms from memory, confessed their sins, and boldly pleaded with God to rescue others from the power of darkness so that they, too, might experience the light and life of Jesus. It was so evident

from these missionaries' prayers that they had been liberated by Jesus's saving power and desperately wanted others to know this freedom, too.

Their transformed lives challenged me to ask to what extent I had surrendered to Jesus's ways rather than living in fear and enslavement to my culture's norms. And throughout the week, as they gave bold testimony to what the Lord had done for them, they touched the lives of many in the community. Some broke free of fear to the spirits of voodoo to boldly follow Christ. Others were healed of physical ailments and torment by evil spirits. Through the Haitian church's faith and obedience to Jesus, I experienced God's kingdom breaking through in ways unfamiliar to me.

Vision for context-specific kingdom work

I also see the church in Haiti and Senegal as gifted with vision for ushering in the reign of God in their contexts. In one of my final years in Haiti, I was attending an urban church with more than a thousand members, including successful business people and healthcare professionals such as pharmacists, nurses, and doctors. The church had a vision for reaching a rural, underserved area of their country, and a couple times each year they assembled a medical and pastoral team to meet the health and spiritual needs of this region. As a nurse practitioner, I joined others in the make-

from my experience applies to Haitian and to Senegalese contexts, see David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, Publications in Ethnography 37 (Dallas: SIL International and International Museum of Cultures, 2001).

shift medical clinic that was set up, using supplies and medicines that church members had donated or received as gifts from their employers.

Annually, many people from churches in North America go to Haiti for the same purpose, bringing with them their own supplies, and often weighed down with gifts and cash to help those with limited resources, many times creating an unhealthy relationship of dependence with Haitians. All too familiar with seeing detrimental handouts in Haiti, I loved hearing the pastor proudly tell the outreach team after the first trip, “We did this all on our own! We did not receive any assistance from foreigners. We came up with our own supplies and our own transport. We, the Haitian church, are capable of doing mission work.” Sadly, it is often the Western church that does not make space for churches of the south to exercise their visionary and missional gifts.

And I am well acquainted with The Way of Righteousness center in St Louis, Senegal. This center is a shining light of God’s kingdom breaking in, and again is an example of the global church’s gift of vision. But in the Senegalese context, with very few Christian believers living in this predominantly Muslim country, partnership with the broader church is needed in order to realize the local church’s vision.

Malick and Feluine Fall, both first-generation Christians from a Muslim background, are the current visionary leaders of the center. The Falls are passionate about holistic ministry in Jesus’s name, in spite of hardships they have experienced over the years because of their choice to follow Jesus. The center was initially started by missionaries, but under the Falls’ direction, strategies have changed to meet various needs in the community. The center not only houses a small church but also provides health services and vocational training opportunities, summer youth and music camps, prison ministries, and radio broadcasts of Bible teachings geared to those from a Muslim context.²

Because of its high-quality ministries, the Way of Righteousness center has received accolades from local public officials, including invitations to expand their educational and health services to the community. But with the church still in its infancy in this country, it would not be possible to operate these ministries without assistance from the church beyond Senegal. While fixing their vision on ministering in ways that are appropriate for their particular context, the Way of Righteousness center has

2 For more on the Way of Righteousness center, see <https://www.facebook.com/yooununjub/>.

welcomed partnerships with similarly minded churches and ministries in North America, Europe, and elsewhere in Africa.

This small church in Senegal has great vision, and although limited in numbers of people and in resources, in collaboration with the global church, by God's grace and power, they are carrying out their vision. It

It would behoove those of us from Western cultures that emphasize speed, finances, and independence to partner with the global church in realizing its vision, rather than coming with our own solutions. As my Senegalese friends often told me, “If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together.”

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Showing hospitality to strangers

Finally, the global church is richly gifted in hospitality. Situated in places where community and hospitality are strong cultural values, Haitian and Senegalese churches embrace hospitality with ease. In these cultures, it is a high honor to be visited by one or many, and just about any other activity under way gets

dropped in order to give time and energy to receiving the visitors at one's door. Although our Western places of work typically do not permit us to show up late just because company came, we could certainly grow in opening our schedules and our homes to others in our churches and our communities.

My experience in the global church has always been that I am especially cared for as the foreigner in their midst. Christians in these places want to make sure that I am comfortable not only in their congregation but also in their community. When I am struggling to learn a new language, they do their best to make sure I understand what is really being communicated. They offer to help me learn how to get around. They show me where to get deals on clothing, where to find the best produce in the market, and how to ride public transportation. They invite me to church activities and into members' homes, to ensure that I feel included.

I am loved and honored in their midst. It is clear that the global church takes seriously the biblical command to show hospitality to strangers.³ I have learned much from their gift of hospitality, and I desire to follow their example in welcoming newcomers into my community and church.

I have been enriched by the global church in many more ways than I can recount here. The international body of Christ is increasingly on our doorstep, as Christian students, refugees, and immigrants seek a better future in Canada and the United States. I pray that we would be able to receive the rich gifts offered by our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world, that together we may proclaim and bear witness to the kingdom of God in our midst.

About the author

Margaret De Jong served in Haiti through Mennonite Central Committee and in Senegal through Mennonite Mission Network. One year after returning to North America, Margaret is newly married and grateful for a sabbatical season. She is currently living in Fort Kent, Maine, and is figuring out what's next as she completes her MDiv studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

3 Rom. 12:13, Heb. 13:2.